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U.S. General Who Won Dak To Battle to Lead Delta Fight

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CPYRGHT

SAIGON—A significant upturn in American military operations in South Vietnam's rich and populous Mekong River Delta was foreshadowed Sunday with the disclosure that Maj. Gen. William R. Peers soon will take over as senior American military adviser and commander in the region.

Peers, 53, is a 1937 graduate of UCLA and a resident of Covina, Calif. He is now commanding the 4th Infantry Division at Pleiku, and just directed the battle of Dak To—one of the war's major allied victories—against an invading force of North Vietnamese regulars.

The appointment was disclosed by top American military authority in Vietnam and confirmed through military channels.

Peers will complete his year's tour of duty in Vietnam this month, and will be transferred from the 4th Division to take home leave over the holidays.

He's Returning in January

He will then return to Vietnam in January for a second tour and on Jan. 15 will succeed Brig. Gen. W. R. DeSobry as senior U.S. military adviser to the Vietnamese 4th Corps at Can Tho, which directs the war in the delta region south and southwest of Saigon. DeSobry is leaving on normal rotation for a new command, as yet unannounced.

The significance of the new appointment lies in Peers' high rank and unusual background in top-level intelligence and counterinsurgency warfare.

Prior to the big American buildup in mid-1965, the American Army provided a "senior adviser" for each of the four Vietnamese corps areas, which run numerically from north to south. At that time the post called for a colonel.

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After the buildup, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the top U.S. commander, organized three multi-division American "field forces" to parallel the first three Vietnamese corps areas, which run from the northern demilitarized zone to just below Saigon on the border of the delta.

Each is commanded by an American lieutenant general. As the next higher command above a division,

Second, as a major general since 1960, with a distinguished command and combat record, Peers would normally be close to promotion to the three-star grade of lieutenant general, which is corps command rank. Third, and possibly most important, Peers has a long record as an expert in Asian jungle fighting, insurgency and counter insurgency methods, and in high-level intelligence and "special warfare" activities.

His military record shows many variations from that of an ordinary "line" officer and should specially fit him for the semi-political, semi-secret methods of warfare used in the delta and along its long and almost open border with Cambodia.

Peers' first war service was as operations officer in Burma for the World War II Office of Strategic Services, predecessor of the special operations branch of the Central Intelligence Agency. He then commanded an OSS detachment in China and ended the war as deputy OSS director in the China theater.

Worked with CIA

After the war he was an intelligence instructor and from 1950 to 1951 was director of training for the CIA. Then followed staff duty in Washington and Europe, command of a

more staff duty in Washington, and a tour as assistant commander of the 4th Division at Ft. Lewis, Wash.—the same division he now commands in Vietnam.

After that, Peers held high staff appointments in Washington for "special operations" and "special warfare" — euphemisms for some of the rougher intelligence and counter-guerrilla activities of the CIA and armed forces.

His value in these confidential posts was quietly recognized by award of the Distinguished Service Medal—one of the highest decorations in the army, normally won by only the highest commanders and staff officers in wartime.

At the present time, it does not appear that Westmoreland has enough troops to create a permanent U.S. field force for the delta.

Could Be Changed

However, this could be changed by assignment of new units to Vietnam—or if Westmoreland thought he could shift some of his present divisions and brigades around to squeeze out a force for the delta.

Short of that, there is no reason why brigades and divisions from the other commands could not be moved into the delta on a temporary basis for single operations.

At present, the 9th Division, part of the 2nd Field Force around Saigon, does keep one of its three brigades at Dong Tam, five miles upriver from My Tho, a 4th Corps Delta province capital southwest of Saigon. This brigade is assigned to man the new amphibious "Riverine" force probing the delta's rivers and bayous.

Whatever the actual outcome, however, Peers' appointment to the delta post seems to mean some kind of stepped-up American activity in this region, which contains 6 million of South Vietnam's 17 million population and the overwhelming majority of its ricelands.